



© Royal Navy Instructor Officers' Association, 2019 - all rights reserved

Service Story of Cdr Michael (Mike) Channon OBE RN

Armed with a BSc in Chemistry, a Dip Ed and one years teaching experience, I applied to be an IO in July 1968 having seen an advertisement in the Times Educational Supplement which showed a lieutenant teaching from a then state of the art overhead projector. It also indicated that I could earn £1,300 pounds a year which was nearly double my teaching salary at the time. Slightly daunted by a contract of at least three years, I resolved to do it. My motivation was not solely financial as I was very keen on sport which I knew to be highly encouraged in the military.

In September 1968, I headed to Britannia Royal Naval College (BRNC), along with another 23 potential IOs to be converted to Naval Officers. I thoroughly enjoyed my time there, playing hockey for the college, running the Drake Division football team and messing about on the river! I even achieved status as a “forward flasher” and found myself dancing with Princess Margaret (for all of 20 seconds) at the Christmas Ball.

I joined the RN Supply School at HMS *Pembroke*, Chatham, in January 1969, which comprised teaching basic Maths and English (NAMET) to mainly stewards and cooks in order to qualify them for Leading Rate. I also ran voluntary O Level classes in Maths and Physics and gave Mechanics coaching to midshipmen in Chatham based ships who were going on to the Royal Naval Engineering College at Manadon. When duty officer, at *Up Spirits*, traditionally at 11am, I was required to supervise rum issue, a job requiring a watchful eye to ensure no-one sneaked an extra tot or two! *Black Tot Day*, as the final day of rum issue came to be called, took place on 31 July 1970.

In September 1970 I joined the Rothesay class, HMS *Plymouth*, a Type 12 ASW Frigate converted to accommodate a Wasp helicopter. This appointment was a steep learning curve for me as in addition to Education and Resettlement Officer, I took on bridge watchkeeping duties, as Second Officer of the Watch initially, became assistant Gunnery Officer, Gun Director Blind and Explosives Accounts Officer.



HMS *Plymouth* berthed alongside Sliema Creek in Valletta, Malta, April 1971

Though not METOC trained (yet) I was expected to do the weather brief every morning using the Coded Analysis (CANAL) which I would have to decode and draw. Using simple weather publications like “Met for Navigators” and “Met for Pilots” I taught myself a basic understanding, but I shudder when I think back on the likely quality of those briefings. The Captain always referred to me as “Clouds”! This appointment was destined to become one of my fondest memories and it firmly cemented my love of the sea. Unfortunately, a scheduled refit was brought forward, and I left the ship prematurely in August 1971, got married and a couple of weeks later moved to HMS *Sultan*.

Unbeknown to me at the time, HMS *Sultan* would prove to be a lengthy appointment of well over four years albeit covering three separate and different positions. It was my first married appointment and I would experience great job satisfaction and a wonderful social life with like-minded colleagues. I started as a full-time divisional officer for Part 2 training of stokers, which had just been relocated from HMS *Raleigh*. It was my privilege to be the course and divisional officer for the very first course, PT 1. This involved a busy routine of academic and professional training, leadership training, parade training, sports, community projects and expeditions to the New Forest. After 15 months, I became the course officer for the Leading Rates and Petty Officers professional qualification courses including divisional officer for the latter. I spent over two years doing this before being moved to the Training Design Centre where I had the arduous task of convincing the establishment of the benefits of objective training before becoming the *Sultan* Assessment and Quality Control Officer.

During my time, I was promoted to Lt Cdr, played hockey for the establishment and ran the local IO football and cricket teams where we enjoyed great rivalry with IO teams from HMS *Collingwood* and HMS *Daedalus*. I also wrote two ship’s pantomimes having been ordered to do so by my SIO, a common lark for schoolies! Once into my fifth year, I decided enough was enough and requested a sea going post at which the appointer laughed and said the only way I would ever get another sea job was to take the Long Meteorology and Oceanography Course.

So, in January 1976 I found myself at the Royal Naval School of Meteorology and Oceanography (RNSOMO) in HMS *Seahawk*, RNAS Culdrose, as class leader of a motley crew of five other IOs and a WRNS Officer. After a mostly enjoyable six months and now a real forecaster (unlike my time in HMS *Plymouth*) I was sent to HMS *Daedalus*, RNAS Lee-on-Solent for a brief period of flying operations forecasting experience, before being appointed to HMS *Kent*, a Guided Missile Destroyer although more like a cruiser in size. While I was at *Daedalus* our first child, a son, was born.

At the end of August, I joined *Kent* as the METOC and Education and Resettlement Officer. The ship was coming out of refit, so a lot of my early time was spent equipping the met office and ensuring I had all the materials and publications that I needed.



HMS *Kent* passing through Tower Bridge, 1980 (by permission RNIOA)

I had more than two wonderful and busy years on board with additional jobs including Senior Flight Deck Officer, Security Officer and Commander's Assistant (Recreation) which basically meant I was responsible to the XO for all non-operational activities like sports, closed circuit TV, quizzes and sods operas. We underwent a BOST and a COST, acted as Plane Guard to *Hermes* on the eastern coast of the USA, circumnavigated the UK, all of which included several enjoyable port visits, and we participated in the Queen's Silver Jubilee Fleet Review. The adage "work hard and play hard" was never truer than in this ship. Our daughter was born in December 1977, and both of my children were christened on board. HMS *Kent* was decommissioned in 1980 and became one of HMS *Sultan's* Harbour Training Ships from 1982 to 1984.

In November 1978 I was appointed to Fleet HQ, Northwood as a METOC bench forecaster. This was a watchkeeping job mainly producing specially tailored forecasts as well as the Shipping Forecast for all areas where RN ships were deployed. Although interesting, I missed the customer contact and banter that is experienced in live briefings, but I enjoyed working with some excellent teams of met ratings when on watch. There were separate live morning briefings to CINCFLEET, FOSM, and RAF 18 Group, the latter often being quite lively with good exchange of interservice repartee.

In early December 1979, I was sent on a married accompanied appointment to Hong Kong as Senior Forecaster and Marine Training Officer at the Royal Observatory. This was a civilian attachment position where the staff were almost all Chinese. This would prove to be a wonderfully fulfilling experience both professionally and socially, and for my family. My children started school and we were able to travel to some exotic Asian countries.

Hong Kong provided a plethora of vastly contrasting cultures, wealth, sights and sounds that assaulted the senses. The whole experience was fascinating. Temperate latitude forecasting experience was of little avail for tropical climes and so the first couple of months were a steep learning curve. My colleagues and superiors were all highly qualified and very westernised, many having achieved PhDs in America or the UK, and they were an absolute pleasure to work with. We provided public forecasts for radio and TV as well as products tailored to special operations. Although I worked ostensibly for the Observatory based in Kowloon, the Royal Navy retained first call on my services when typhoons threatened. This involved briefings for RN and visiting ships of various nationalities. Hong Kong harbour was no place to be anchored during a tropical cyclone so recommendations might include sailing for larger ships, timely enough to ensure they would achieve plenty of sea room to ride out the storms or lifting smaller vessels out of the water to be secured safely in the dockyard. Back then there were five resident minesweepers (Ton class) acting as patrol vessels and I was fortunate enough to grab a berth on HMS *Beachampton* for a deployment to the Philippines.



Hong Kong

The Prince of Wales Building with the old HMS *Tamar* building quayside (left), Royal Observatory (right)

Ironically, we would have to leave our first port of call prematurely due to a threatening typhoon. This meant an uncomfortable dash for a typhoon haven in the USN base at Subic Bay to escape the storm, which ended up directly hitting and creating havoc at the very port that we had sailed from! One amusing incident, when the storm had passed through, was one of the young officers asking the US liaison officer whether he could run around the perimeter fence of the base as part of his morning exercise. The US officer smiled and said he was welcome to do so but the distance was 76 miles!

Interestingly, the Prince of Wales Building (pictured in the previous page) is now totally landlocked due to land reclamation, and is used for Chinese Forces, while the Royal Observatory was an unlikely oasis in the middle of Kowloon. The grounds there surprisingly filtered out the city sounds. I remained in Hong Kong for almost three years, finally departing in November 1982.

My next post was Senior Instructor at RNSOMO, RNAS Culdrose, Cornwall (my native county) where it had been seven years since I had joined as a student. I relished teaching again and, in particular, training my own branch to become METOCs.

In January 1986 I was appointed to the Directorate of Naval Oceanography and Meteorology (DNOM) in London, my first (and only) MOD job. Here I was responsible for the implementation and installation of newly procured METOC equipment as well as all aspects (maintenance, replacement, troubleshooting) of in-service equipment, instruments, spares, stores, supplies, charts and publications. I was also liaison officer to the Met Office. I was selected for promotion to Commander on 1 April, confirmed on 1 September 1986. Apart from the weekend commute to Cornwall, this was an enjoyable post which opened my eyes to the machinations of the MOD.

In March 1987 I was appointed to a NATO post at the Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic (SACLANT) HQ in Norfolk, Virginia, as the Staff Meteorological Officer. I was responsible for policy, planning, coordination and provision of meteorological services to NATO maritime forces. With unanimous approval required from member nations for policy decisions I soon discovered that NATO moves frustratingly slowly, but I thoroughly enjoyed the multinational environment of the HQ and the usual social benefits of a foreign accompanied post.

In October 1989, I returned to RNSOMO, this time as the Officer-in-Charge (OIC), a post I'd always hankered after and one of the few command jobs for schoolies. With an excellent staff, I was able to introduce moral boosting activities (needed at a time of low recruitment) and obtained civilian accreditation of the METOC course towards an MSc in Marine Science at Plymouth University. This appointment lived up to all my expectations and was one of the best periods of my over 28 years of service.

In October 1992 I was happily heading back to SACLANT HQ, this time as the Staff Oceanographic Officer. The environmental section of SACLANT was being restructured combining the posts of oceanography and meteorology, and having done the latter three years earlier, I was probably the ideal candidate for the new job. This appointment was professionally far more fulfilling than my earlier experience and proved to be very busy. I was Secretary to a high-level NATO Group on Military Oceanography, Chairman of its Sub Group, Project Manager of the Allied Environmental Support System (AESS) and Chairman of its Configuration Management Board (CMB) and Manager of the NATO Standard Oceanographic Database. My retirement date was extended to enable me to complete the AESS project. I obtained great satisfaction managing this venture from procurement to implementation in just over three years, undoubtedly a record for a NATO project of this scale. Towards the end of my time, I was informed that I was no longer a schoolie but a seaman officer, a Commander X (METOC). A Senior British Officer arranged a small mess gathering of other seaman officers to welcome me to the elite, executive branch. My tongue in cheek response was that I was very honoured but with retirement looming, as a schoolie I had been guaranteed to find a civilian job but as an X my chances had reduced considerably! Unsurprisingly, this received only muted chuckles.

I returned to the UK for resettlement and foreign service leave at the end of September 1996. I retired in December and was soon privileged to discover I'd been awarded an OBE for services to NATO, in the New Year's Honours List. Though unknown to me at the time, I would return to SACLANT in mid-February 1997 as a NATO civilian and stay in the States another 13 years before final retirement. Initially I was recruited to design and implement a training course for the NATO Maritime Command and Control Information System (MCCIS) and later became a Training Manager responsible for all NATO Training Policy and implementing a Systems Approach to Training and Train the Trainer Courses NATO wide.

Looking back on my RN time I would change nothing. I regard myself as extremely lucky to have had such a rewarding and enjoyable career of over 28 years. I worked with many really talented officers and some wonderfully gifted senior and junior ratings. There was always a superb attitude to both work and play with an unsurpassed camaraderie in the club we know as the RN. I was always proud to be a schoolie and enjoyed demonstrating our considerable talents to other specialisations. Becoming a METOC also proved to be a good decision for me personally. I still feel the demise of the Instructor Branch was the Navy's loss. I have some truly wonderful memories. My sea-going appointments stand out, as does my command job at RNSOMO and my final post in NATO. Hong Kong remains my favourite time of all.



OIC, RNSOMO 1989